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ABSTRACT

Through an original analysis of letters written by 8 students at 4 grade levels (grades 7 through 13), this paper shows the relationship between individual affective and cognitive development and social awareness. Specifically, their relationships are shown by analyzing the writer, the text, and the instructor. Results indicate that seventh grade students were clearly trying to understand who they were and what labels to give people. Ninth graders were organizing ideas and classifying people. Eleventh graders had the requisite experience to find individual examples as models, so they could rank these examples into good, better, best types of behavior. Students in grade 13 began to see the fluidity in relationships. Not only are the stages of affective growth revealed by writing, but the written text in turn is influenced by the affective growth of the writer. While the grade level development varies for particular students, its sequential pattern seems to be invariable. Students tend to enjoy social interaction and group learning, and the computer makes group revision, editing, and multiple copying easier than ever before. Emphasis on the use of small group discussions creates multiple perspectives as a basis for students' own interpretations and arguments. The importance of a sense of audience on the purpose, content and style of a writer's work is also emphasized. (MG)

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THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF WRITING

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Fifth Annual Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

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Writing is the private self made public. We write for diverse reasons each with its own social implications. We write to communicate, to solve problems, to resolve conflicts. We write to make intimate connections with others and to avoid the embarrassment of face-to-face contact. We write to gain employment and to avoid being left out socially. We write to remember with precision what we experienced, to affirm our own feelings and insights and to pass on our memories to others. We write out of a need for social change and protest.

Through an original analysis of letters written by eight students at four grade levels (from grades 7 through 13), this paper shows the relationship between individual affective and cognitive development and social awareness. Specifically, their relationships are shown by analyzing the writer, the text and the instructor. At different stages, students ask or imply different questions of society in their letters. For seventh graders it might be, "What type of person am I or are they?" For ninth graders the question might be, "What is important, and how do I classify it?" "What is right and proper?" is the construct I attribute to eleventh graders. "How can I gain control over others or my environment or adapt to others or to it?" was the construct I inferred from my thirteenth graders. While the grade level development varies for particular students, its sequential pattern seems to be invariable. Not only are the stages of such affective growth revealed by writing, but the writing process and the written text in turn are influenced by the affective growth of the writer.

Instructors who are aware of the stages of their students' cognitive and affective development can create social environments that will enhance rather than impede such development. This paper will suggest social motivations for student writing, the role of criticism whether of self, by peers, or by instructors, the degree of social interaction, autonomy and privacy encouraged by different assignments from journal writing to group term papers. Emphasis will be placed on the use of small group discussions to create multiple perspectives as a basis for students' own interpretations and arguments.

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Why We Write

Much of our writing stems from and serves social purposes. These purposes include the need for intimacy and love, for self-expression, for mastery of skills and work, and for the preservation of our traditions as the following anecdotes will reveal.

Recently, a student revealed to me that he was too upset to work in English class that day. It seems that he had been caught in a compromising position with his fiancee, by her father. The father refused both to listen to any explanation he might care to offer or to allow him to see her again. When I suggested that he write the father a carefully worded letter of explanation, the students' depression lifted at once. As a result, and much to his delight, he was not only granted permission to see his girlfriend, but won her father's confidence and friendship. Such is the power of the pen.

Why had the pen succeeded when repeated in-person conversations and telephone calls had failed? What are the unique social implications of writing? Other examples drawn from the social perspective of students should provide a clearer answer.

A newly arrived Chinese student in my freshman English class provided some insight. Through writing, she said, "You can express not only your thoughts, which include suggestion, invention, design, advice and opinion, etc, but also your feelings of joy, sorrow, and delight. It may be used as an indirect method for getting in touch with other people. There are some advantages in using a pen and blank paper rather than in having to speak face-to-face with the opposite sex" or, I might add, with an angry adult or prospective father-in-law.

Without articulating the specific significance of writing, a prisoner I interviewed for a literacy project revealed that he values learning to read and to write because he hopes to get a job when he leaves prison. In the past, whenever he attempted to fill out a job application he was humiliated by having to ask for assistance from other applicants and by taking so much time that prospective employers commented on his slowness. Although this man had completed a ninth grade

education in the South, he was upset that he could neither write a card to his mother on her birthday, nor communicate with friends and family through the privacy of letters. Also, since anyone could hear what he had to say on the phone, he could never really tell his loved ones how much their support had meant to him.

So far, I have emphasized the social and economic impetus for writing. There are others. My father, who never considered himself articulate, has recently begun to write his memoirs. These memoirs have served to recreate and preserve much of what he experienced in his youth, to provide an opportunity to pass on to future generations that personal historical drama of which we might otherwise be deprived.

A friend had difficulty overcoming the grief that resulted from the death of his wife and the end of his 20 year marriage. Despite the fact that he eventually remarried, he retained a need to share years of intimate memories. Rather than burden his second wife, he used a journal as a means of communing with his earlier love and for making a transition to his new life. For him, such writing was therapeutic.

From the above examples, we can see that we write for many and diverse reasons, each with its own social implications. We write to communicate, to solve problems, to resolve conflicts.

We write to make intimate connections with others and to avoid the embarassment of face-to-face contact when we feel socially insecure and inhibited. We write to gain employment and to avoid being left out socially. We write to remember with precision what we experienced and to pass on our own memories to others, whether in diaries, journals, letters, essays, short story, poetry, plays, or novels or songs. We write for affirmation of our own feelings and insights or a need to expose others to a fresh point of view. We write out of a need for social change and protest as did Harriet Beecher Stowe with her famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Abraham Lincoln called her "the little lady who started this great war," meaning the Civil War. We write because we have seen others write and because our own writing has been read and appreciated.

On the other hand, we don't write when we fear that we will be betrayed by what we write, or judged by an overly critical friend, relative, teacher, employer, or general reader. We don't write when we are blocked by our inhibitions or, as Peter Elbow suggested in *Writing Without Teachers*, when we are blocked by "the keeper at the gates". We don't write when writing seems purposeless, or if we do so our writing appears forced. Many of us cannot do well that which we expect of our students- spontaneous writing on a topic not of their choosing.

What We Write

When we have the choice, what is that we do write? An answer may be found in a study I conducted, titled *To Whom it may Concern: The Role of Letter-Writing in English Language Education.* I discovered that much of the out-of-school writing students do is in the form of letters, a genre that provides a pleasureable outlet for many of the 13-19 year olds in the study. For them, such writing provides a means of discovering their own and others' thoughts and feelings. A few have pen pals here and abroad with whom they correspond regularly. It is a process which they find particularly exciting and rewarding, for it offers them an intimate and first hand vision of the world that they are not likely to experience themselves. For those living in small, tight communities or disturbing environments, it offers them a chance to develop a new identity of choice.

How We Write: Stages of Social and Cognitive Development

In the course my research, I discovered certain patterns in both the intellectual and social development of the eight students directly involved in my study. From analyzing the patterns of their responses to three letters ranging from

reflective to the extensive or transactional mode, I infer that there are developmental stages in these eight students' social or affective development. In their writing, 7th graders are concerned with the question of "What type of person am I or are they?" Clearly they are simply trying to understand who they or others are and what labels to give people. For 9th graders, the question is "What is important, and how do I classify it?" These students are doing more than collecting ideas, they are organizing ideas and classifying people. For 11th graders the question is, "What is right and proper?" It seems, that at this point in their social development they have the requisite experience to find individual examples as models, so that they can rank these examples into good, better, best types of behavior. For the 13th graders, or college freshmen, the question is "How can I gain control over my environment or adapt to others or to it? Such students have begun to see the fluidity in relationships, and in society in general. They have come to realize both their personal potential and limitations and to place them in the context of a larger world and a lengthier historic tradition. Unlike younger people, they have seen such transformations around them, and know that few conditions are final.

Not only are the stages of affective growth revealed by writing, but the witten text in turn is influenced by the affective growth of the writer. For example, the same 7th

graders, who are in the process of discovering who they or others are, are also overgeneralizing from spelling or grammar rules, or stereotyping others in sexual, national, ethnic, age related, or job related terms. In their search for certainty these students either see only one person, as an individual or generalize the behavior of a group, but cannot mediate well between the specific and general categories in either cognitive or affective domains. While in my particular study, I found such inability to distinguish within like categories a common behavior in seventh graders, Mina Shaughnessy (*Errors and Expectations*, 1978) observed similar behavior in basic writers even at the college level. The point I am making here is that these stages occur in a sequential pattern, but they do not necessarily occur at the same age or grade for all students.

In the next stage of affective growth, the 9th graders in my study became increasingly orderly and selective. In contrast to 7th graders, they were not only better able to make subtle distinctions between members of like categories, but tended to categorize and to rank both ideas and people in order of importance. They appreciated the opportunity to write friendly letters and thereby to explore a larger world than family, school and neighborhood. Their pleasure in categorization might be applied to outlining their written work or their responses to reading or rating their favorite teams, records, foods political candidates and heroes.

By 11th grade, students in my study became increasingly evaluative both in terms of people and ideas. At this stage their concerns center on the question of morality and propriety. To form their evaluations, they are able to depend upon on an expanding world of experiences and ideas. From this larger world they are able to draw generalizations, make distinctions, categorize and rank people and ideas. They are more willing to accept authority, be it formal rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation or the social limitations of adult authority figures and to accept corrections in, or suggestions about, their writing. Consequently they more often edit, if not revise, their works. Unlike 7th graders, they do not feel totally rejected by criticism, realizing that one can be rejected only in part and that certain types or categories of rejection can be kept separate from others. Their growing sense of justice and morality can be extended to understanding or interpreting literary texts and writing character analyses in response.

The selected 13 graders or college freshmen were greater activists than their younger subjects. Their concerns center on the question of how they could best adapt to their environment or change it to suit their own needs. Such social and intellectual change requires advanced planning, which in turn requires the integration of all the aforementioned stages of

lower grade students, such as: generalization, categorization, subordination and superordination and evaluation. Their more certain locus of control allows them greater flexibility of movement and fluidity of style and content. They are now capable of simultaneously holding multiple perspectives about issues and people, and using these perspectives in multiple drafts revisions of their own writing. They are capable of writing essays or letters to the editor voicing their opinions or asking for change. At the same time they are interested in using writing journals to react to reading, to analyze and change their own behavior or habits or to make decisions

How to Improve Students' Writing

You may ask how such a study can address the social implications of writing? Through awareness of the stages of social and intellectual development, instructors may maximize the conditions for their students' writing. For example, instructors may allow their students to participate actively in creating or varying writing assignments in accordance with their developing interests or in response to their reading or experience. Many liberated faculty members feel more comfortable with flexible class arrangements rather than teacher dominated and hierachically structured classrooms. Since these instructors do not consider themselves to be direct

transmittors of knowledge, but rather facilitators of learning, they are more willing than others to encourage the particpation and sharing made possible by group learning activities such as research, writing, revising and editing of group term papers.

In turn, students who perceive the purposes of instruction to be largely those of problem solving, self expression, and the formation of independent aesthetic judgements rather than the regurgitation of facts are less intimitated by their professors' authority and are more willing than others to cooperate with their fellow students in joint writing ventures, even to the extent of exposing their deficiencies or accepting group grades. Moreover, recent studies (*American Educator*: American Federation of Teachers Summer 1986 "Learning Together" by Robert E. Slavin, pp. 6-11) of students from elementary through high school who were engaged in cooperative learning activities show that 86% had consistently higher achievement as well as improved attitudes towards other classmates, particularly those from different ethnic backgrounds. The positive indications were derived from 30 out of 35 studies. While cooperative learning worked for students from urban, suburban and rural schools, and equally for high, middle and low achievers, their success depended on two key elements. Whole groups must be rewarded for high achievement and each student's individual learning must be considered and facilitated by the group. Otherwise, students will return to

their usual level of intense competition.

Prior to determining the social structure necessary to optimize learning, instructors in conjunction with their students, must determine the purpose of the assignment, the nature of the audience including their level of maturity, the degree of formality they expect, how much credence they place in the author and how much confidentiality they will permit. For example, students may write an oral history. They may then use their small groups for discussing the types of questions they might need to ask to fulfill the purpose of the assignment. One student might be chosen to lead the group discussion while another might serve to record the groups' questions. Then the group might revise and edit these questions with special consideration as to the nature of the audience or in this case the interviewee, so that the questions are appropriate to the age, sex, ethnic background, socioeconomic level, and so forth. Students must help each other avoid violating the confidentiality of some of their interviewees' responses and should plan means to do so in advance.

To Whom it May Concern

The purpose, content and style of the work writers produce is largely dependent upon their sense of audience. A sense of

audience is in turn derived from the writers' own sense of identity and social relations with others. For what types of audiences may we write? We may write for ourselves. We may write for one other person. We may write for a small group. We may write for a large but friendly audience, or we may write for a large impersonal audience that is not present.

Much of what we write we write for ourselves in the form of notes or reminders, journals or diaries or simply lists of things to do. In such cases we become our own audiences and therefore our writing tends to be brief, terse with privately embedded references. In such cases our writing becomes an externalized form of inner speech abbreviated by the lack of a larger audience. In a study I once conducted of marginal notes found in response to reading such responses included analogies to other readings, definitions and displays of emotion-either enthusiastic or critical. Occasionally there were cross references to other pages or other similar works, asteriks or underlines or brackets. As you can understand a person writing to himself or herself rather than a larger audience need not account for lack of common background.

When we write to or for another person or group of people we must anticipate possible sources of confusion if we are to write clearly. Experienced writers anticipate their readers' questions, possible causes of confusion and their points o

view. Many can even picture their readers and imagine what they are thinking. Such is not the case with the inexperienced writer who may choose to hide behind inflated language in order to avoid risking self exposure, who often fails to organize writing in logical order and so confuses the reader, or who avoids proper capitalization, punctuation and grammar for lack of such consideration or training. When professors ask their students to write to people in particular authority, they may forget that many students have limited exposure to such personalitities. A face-to-face meeting with one member of such a group may make such a writing task much easier. Here again a middle or upper class student, because of greater exposure to a variety of professionals, may have a distinct advantage unless some positive intervention is provided by the instructor.

Some particular difficulties may be experienced by students who perceive their instructors as their only audience. Frequently inexperienced student writers assume that their professor already knows what they are saying and therefore fail to specify the basis for their argument or to provide enough evidence for its support. The instructor, on the other hand, may be using the term paper as a means of discovering the extent of student learning in any given course and rightfuly assumes that an argument lacking in evidence is insufficient.

Therefore, it is often useful for instructors to suggest that students write for an audience one or two years younger than themselves in order to be properly explicit and to avoid stilted language.

When we write to or for someone we know well, we can once again abbreviate our language, although not as much as we can when conversing with someone who is present, for in writing as opposed to speaking we are denied the help of body language and visual clues. Still, easy allusions to shared experiences are possible and need not be spelled out in lengthy detail. Such abbreviated language is not useful, however, when we write impersonal business letters requiring precise details.

To enhance the quality of their students' business writing, for example, instructors may provide business contacts and varied contexts to support such writing and analyze both sets of responses. Moreover, students interested in the problems of automation may be allowed to interview managers and workers at industrial plants or write letters to either group. In addition, student may write double entry journal accounts of their experiences, part objective and part subjective, and they may use their notes as the basis for an argument and persuasion essay or a term paper.

Other social contexts for writing include maternal and

child care agencies, with social workers, doctors, parents and children all providing appropriate subjects for study. The college campus or surrounding community offers students with multiple opportunities to broaden their social contacts, which in turn may enhance their self understanding and form the basis for important career decisions. Even imaginary contexts may provide the impetus for engaged and empathetic writing, including writing to characters in a novel, play or poem or writing out of the head of a character in a photograph or painting. Such writing fosters a move from egocenticity and toward social maturity.

The need to expand the social context for writing and hence learning does not end with adolescence. Even academics need diverse social contexts, for it is only through experiences such as attendance at this conference that we develop the basis for writing professional papers. It is from such contacts that we can internalize our concepts of academic peers at institutions other than our own. Here too our writing takes on a social dimension as we tap into our common pool of knowledge, aim to place new knowledge into a workable context and cooperate with other members of our committee and our chair.

As suggested before, we learn the social implications of writing by writing in diverse social contexts and for diverse purposes. Modern technology has impacted on and expanded the

social contexts for writing and learning. The printing press, the telephone, the typewriter, the radio, the motion picture, the t.v. and most recently the computer all exposed us to a variety of cultures and subcultures and have been used by instructors with varying degrees of success to expand opportunities for writers. Computers in schools, colleges, and in the workplace have made writing a much less private act than in the past. As a result of their highly visible screens and the possibilities of interactive programs, cooperative writing is more appropriate than ever before. While the saying goes that a camel designed by committee is really a horse, most corporate and voluntary organization paperwork is now produced by committees in the form of memos, letters and group reports. Industries depend on those who are able to write and edit in groups. Why not employ group writing in the classroom?

When we can rid ourselves of the notion that the main purpose of students' write is so that we can test their skills, we can concentrate on ways to promote real learning. Students are even more peer conscious than adults. They tend to enjoy social interaction and group learning. Group writing projects can go a long way in eliminating student boredom, anxiety, procrastination, plagiarism and carelessness. The computer makes group revision, editing and multiple copying easier than ever before. Even in response to literature courses such group papers provide a useful transition to independent response

papers and encourage better students to assist weaker students. In such an atmosphere students are able to develop friendships, fulfill their need for intimacy, for self expression, for the mastery of skills and work and for the preservation of our traditions.